<BOOK REVIEW>Performing the Great Peace : Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan, by Luke Roberts

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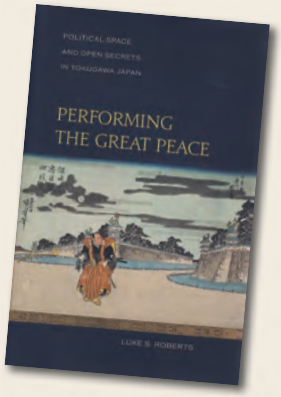
Book Review

Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan



Luke Roberts

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Luke Roberts' *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan* is a multi-domain-focused history of politics in the Tokugawa period, one of several "non-central" (p. 18) Tokugawa histories inspired by Philip Brown's seminal *Central Authority and Local Autonomy in the Formation of Early Modern Japan*. But *Performing the Great Peace* is also much more than just a domainal history. Roberts examines documents from Tosa, Nikkō, Mito, and other outlying domains as gateways into a deep consideration of the situational and performative nature of political interaction during the period of Tokugawa rule. In doing so, Roberts argues that performative politics was the cornerstone of the long Edo peace. Scholars have long known that rhetoric and discourse were sites for manipulating local political truth in order to square inconvenient facts with a fictional Tokugawa ideal of serene governance, but Roberts' unique contention is that this negotiated governance, this politics of performance, was the bedrock of the Pax Tokugawa. As Roberts encapsulates it in the title of his work, the Great Tokugawa Peace was not so much imposed as it was *performed*. The "sealed-off spaces of governance" (p. 5, *hōken* 封建) were the discrete "containers" of political life, and their boundaries were the sites of the performances that kept the archipelago at peace for more than two hundred and fifty years. This compelling new paradigm for doing political history will surely change the way scholars approach the subject of both regional and macro political interaction in Tokugawa Japan.

Read in this way, documentary evidence yields a new picture of Tokugawa politics. When a daimyo died without having named an heir, for example, Tokugawa law held that daimyo should be disenfeoffed. But the disembodied hand of a "sick" (but really long dead) daimyo was allowed to reach from behind a screen in the presence of Tokugawa inspectors and sign documents of succession, thus "performing" the peace and allowing all parties to maintain the politically expedient fiction of a smooth succession of local power (pp. 79–83). This disconnect worked, Roberts argues, because of the crucial distinction between *omote*, or things done in order to comport with the niceties of a punctiliously rule-bound regime, and *naishō*, or the tacit understanding shared by all, authorities and underlings alike, that the benign peace of the Tokugawa rule could be maintained simply by acting as though the rules were being followed.

Performing the Great Peace is divided into six chapters, allowing Roberts to focus, in turn, on political geography, the performative nature of political knowledge, the

"disembodied-hand" succession ritual, local border disputes, performed religious orthodoxy, and the consequences of this epistemological milieu for the writing of history. In Chapter One, "The Geography of Politics," Roberts convincingly shows that the meanings of discrete political units were contingent upon whether those units were being discussed for the authorities—*omote*—or amongst insiders—*naishō* (*uchi*). Roberts then argues, in "Performing the Tokugawa Right to Know," that wide discrepancies between the records daimyo submitted to the Tokugawa authorities and the actual figures were not a sign of Tokugawa weakness but a tacit acknowledgement of Tokugawa authority, for the daimyo were outwardly adhering to the rules of the performed Great Peace. Chapter Three, "Politics of the Living Dead," is an exploration of the practice and ramifications of having a body double play the part of a dead local lord in order to smooth over potential succession difficulties. "Territorial Border Disputes" in many ways builds upon Herman Ooms' 1996 *Tokugawa Village Practice*, showing how local stakeholders could use the Tokugawa's aversion to open dissent in order to cow the authorities into bending the rigid official rules.

"Daimyo Gods" tracks changes in Edo religious thought and practice that occurred gradually over time. The disruptive proto-nativism of Yamazaki Ansai (1619–1682) and Yoshikawa Koretaru (1616–1694), and their spiritual forebear Yoshida Kanetomo (1435–1511), for example, posed a challenge to the burgeoning Tokugawa monopoly on normative religiosity. But as long as one performed the proper obeisance to the Tokugawa supernatural order, one's private beliefs were not subjected to questioning by the Tokugawa authorities. In the last chapter, "Histories," Roberts caps off his detailed investigation into the Tokugawa ritual, religious, and political mind by reflecting on the diversity of Tokugawa historiography, with especial attention paid to the differences in Tokugawa-emperor hierarchies. In doing so, Roberts complicates Ronald Toby's contention that early modern Japan constituted a unitary state, because the *omote* of deference to Tokugawa rule concealed a *naishō* of centripetal domainal agency (in which sense Roberts' work dovetails nicely with the similar challenge that Robert Hellyer posed to Toby in his *Defining Engagement*). It is in this last chapter that one wishes Roberts had pushed his analysis a bit further to engage more fully with Mary Elizabeth Berry's *Japan in Print*. Berry argued that later Tokugawa print culture created a "cultural imaginary" which in turn gave rise to a sense of proto-nationalism amongst literate Japanese. Roberts (p. 10) sees this cultural imaginary as just one element of nascent national consciousness. But might not local daimyo, fearful lest non-governmental printing appear to assume a too muscular political dimension, have dissembled—and encouraged other authors to dissemble—in this matter, too? Was there a stronger strain of *naishō* national awareness that the documentary evidence has shrouded in Tokugawa-pleasing *omote*?

Roberts' main aim in writing *Performing the Great Peace* is to argue that the tacitly accepted slippage between realpolitik and political ideal was the key to the Tokugawa Great Peace. In this he succeeds brilliantly. After Roberts, scholars must look at the performative nature of Tokugawa politics as having been integral to the stability of the realm. Those interested in political history in general, or in the ways in which religions, historiographies, rituals, governments, and rhetorics of negotiation and power change over time, will find much to admire in *Performing the Great Peace*. This book would also be a useful introductory work for graduate seminars on Tokugawa history, as it is richly grounded both in the

practices of the Edo government and in the current tectonic shifts in historiography, in both English and Japanese, about the Tokugawa and their world.

Reviewed by Jason Morgan

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